

*The Life of Madonna Properzia de' Rossi,
Sculptress from Bologna*

[c.1490–1530]

It is extraordinary that in all the skills and pursuits in which women in any period whatever have with some preparation become involved, they have always succeeded most admirably and have become more than famous, as countless examples could easily demonstrate. And everyone certainly knows how valuable all women are in economic matters, as well as in warfare, where we recognize Camilla, Harpalice, Valasca, Thomyris, Penthesilca, Malpadia, Orithyia, Antiope, Hippolyta, Semiramis, Zenobia, and also Fulvia, Mark Antony's wife, who (as the historian Dione relates) took up arms on many occasions to defend her husband and herself. But in poetry women have been even more marvellous: as Pausanias tells us, Corinna was greatly celebrated as a writer of verse, while Eustathius mentions the very distinguished young woman Sappho in the catalogue of Homer's ships, as does Eusebius in his chronicle, and if Sappho really was a woman, she was a woman who surpassed by far all the distinguished writers of her time. And Varro also praises excessively but deservedly Erinna, who with three hundred verses contended with the glorious renown of the first light of Greece, and whose one small volume called *Eliche* equalled the great Homer's lengthy *Iliad*. Aristophanes celebrates Carissenna, likewise a poetess, as a most learned and distinguished woman; and also Theano, Merone, Polla, Elpis, Cornificia, and Telesilla, to whom a very beautiful statue was erected in the temple of Venus because of her many wondrous talents. And leaving aside many other women who wrote verse, do we not read that Arcta instructed the learned Aristippus in the problems of philosophy? And Lasthenia and Assiotea were pupils of the

most divine Plato? And in the art of oratory, Sempronia and Hortensia, Roman women, were very famous. In grammar, Agalla (as Athenaeus remarks) was truly exceptional, while in predicting future events by astrology or magic, it is sufficient to recall that Themis, Cassandra, and Manto enjoyed great renown in their day, just as Isis and Ceres did in the laws of agriculture and the daughters of Thespis in all fields of knowledge generally.

But certainly in no other age could this be better recognized than in our own, an age in which women have acquired the greatest fame, not only in the study of letters, as have Signora Vittoria del Vasta, Signora Veronica Gambara, Signora Caterina Anguisola, Schioppa, Nugarola, Madonna Laura Battiferra, and a hundred other extremely learned women, both in the vernacular and in Latin and Greek, but even in all the other branches of learning.* They have not been ashamed, as if to wrest us away from boasting of our superiority, to place themselves, with their tender and lily-white hands, in the mechanical arts between the roughness of marble and the harshness of iron in order to attain their desire and to earn renown, just as Properzia de' Rossi has done in our day; a young girl from Bologna, she was not only skilful in household duties like other women, but in countless fields of knowledge, so that not only the women but all the men were envious of her. This woman was very beautiful and played and sang better than any other woman of the city in her day. And because she had a ready and inventive wit, she began to carve peach-stones, which she did so well and with such patience that they were most unusual and marvellous to see, not only for the precision of her work but for the slender figures she carved on them and for her most truly delicate style of arranging them. It was certainly a marvel to see the entire Passion of Christ carved upon such a small peach-stone in the most beautiful intaglio, with countless characters besides the crucifiers and the Apostles.* And since it had been decided to decorate the three doors of the façade of San Petronio with marble figures, this carving of hers gave her the courage to ask the trustees, through her husband as intermediary, for a part of the project, to which they were happy to agree, as soon

as she showed them some work in marble carved with her own hand. Accordingly, she immediately carved for Count Alessandro de' Pepoli a living portrait in the finest marble of Count Guido, his father. This work was extremely pleasing, not only to the count but to the entire city, and as a result the trustees did not fail to commission her for part of that project. She completed a most graceful panel, to the greatest amazement of all Bologna—since at the time the poor woman was very much in love with a handsome young man who, it seemed, cared little for her—in which she carved Potiphar's wife who, having fallen in love with Joseph and almost desperate after so many entreaties to him, finally takes off her clothes before him with a womanly grace that is more than admirable.* This sculpture was deemed most beautiful by everyone, and it gave her great satisfaction, since with this figure from the Old Testament she felt she had expressed in part her own most burning passion.* Nor did she wish to do anything else for this building, even though everyone asked her to go on, except Maestro Amico,* who always discouraged her out of envy and always spoke badly of her to the trustees and was so malicious that she was paid a very wretched price for her work. She also did two angels in high relief with beautiful proportions, though against her will, which can be seen today in the same cathedral. Eventually, she took up copper engraving, which she did faultlessly and with the greatest praise. In the end, the poor enamoured girl succeeded perfectly at everything except her most unhappy love.

The renown of such a noble and elevated talent spread through all of Italy and finally reached the ears of Pope Clement VII who, soon after he had crowned the emperor in Bologna,* asked about her and discovered that the unhappy woman had died that same week and had been buried in the Ospedale della Morte, as she had requested in her last testament. The pope, who was anxious to see her, was extremely distressed by her death, but her fellow citizens were even more so, for while she lived they had regarded her as one of the greatest miracles of nature in our times. In our sketch-book, there are several drawings done by her in pen and ink and

copied from works by Raphael of Urbino, which are very good, and her own portrait was obtained from some painters who were her close friends.

But even though Properzia was very skilful in design, there have been other women who have not only equalled her in design but who have done as well in painting as she did in sculpture. The first of these is Sister Plautilla,* a nun and now the prioress of the convent of Santa Caterina of Siena in Florence on Piazza San Marco. Beginning little by little by sketching and imitating with her colours the pictures and paintings of excellent masters, she has with great diligence completed a number of works which have amazed our artisans. Two panels in the church of the same Convent of Santa Caterina are by her hand.* But most praised is the one in which the Wise Men are worshipping Christ. In the Monastery of Santa Lucia in Pistoia, there is a large panel in the choir which contains the Madonna with Her child in Her arms, Saint Thomas, Saint Augustine, Saint Mary Magdalene, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Agnes, Saint Catherine the Martyr, and Saint Lucy. And another large panel done by her was sent to the hospital of Lemo. In the refectory of the same Convent of Santa Caterina, there is a large Last Supper,* while another of her panels is in the work-room. For the homes of Florentine noblemen, she did so many paintings that it would take too long to discuss them all. The wife of Signor Mondragone the Spaniard owns a large Annunciation, and another similar painting of it is owned by Madonna Marietta de Fedini. A small Madonna is in San Giovannino in Florence. And a predella for the altar is in Santa Maria del Fiore, in which there are some very handsome scenes from the life of Saint Zenobius. And since this venerable and talented nun studied the art of miniature before she began to work on panels and important works, there are many lovely little works done by her hand now owned by a number of people which need not be mentioned. But best among her works are those she imitated from others, which demonstrates that she would have created marvellous works if, like men, she had been able to study and to work on design and to draw natural objects from life. The truth of this can be seen in her painting

of Christ's Nativity, copied from one done by Bronzino for Filippo Salviati. The truth of this is also demonstrated in this fact: that in her works, the faces and features of the women, whom she could see whenever she liked, are much better than the heads of men and are closer to reality. In one of her works, among the women's faces, she portrayed Madonna Gostanza de' Doni, who, in our day, was an example of incredible beauty and honesty, and she did it so well that for a woman (since she had little experience for the reasons given above), one could not wish for more.

Likewise, Madonna Lucrezia, the daughter of Messer Alfonso Quistelli dalla Mirandola and now wife of Count Clemente Pietra, has to her great praise studied design and painting and is still doing so, having learned from Alessandro Allori,* the pupil of Bronzino, as we can see in her many paintings and portraits, which are worthy of being praised by everyone. But Sophonisba of Cremona,* the daughter of Amilcaro Angusciovola, has worked with deeper study and greater grace than any woman of our times at problems of design, for not only has she learned to draw, paint, and copy from nature, and reproduce most skilfully works by other artists, but she has on her own painted some most rare and beautiful paintings. Thus, it was well deserved when Philip, King of Spain, having heard about her talents and merits from the Duke of Alba, sent for her and had her brought with the greatest honour to Spain, where he supports her in the queen's company with a huge provision, to the amazement of all his court which admires as a wondrous thing Sophonisba's excellence. Not long ago Messer Tommaso Cavalieri, a Roman gentleman, sent to Lord Duke Cosimo, in addition to a drawing by the divine Michelangelo which contains a Cleopatra, another drawing by Sophonisba, in which a young girl is laughing at a small boy crying, because after she had placed a basket full of lobsters in front of him, one of them bit his finger. One could not see a more graceful or realistic drawing than this one. Since she lives in Spain and Italy does not possess copies of her works, I have placed it in our sketch-book in memory of Sophonisba's talent. We can therefore truthfully say along with the divine Ariosto:

And truly women have excelled indeed
In every art to which they set their hand.*

And let this be the end of the life of Properzia, sculptress from Bologna.